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Qualitative Methods (part 3): There is nothing outside the text?

Introduction:

In the previous reports I have tried to suggest that there is now a maturity about qualitative methods in geography, but also that there comes with this a certain conventionality of approaches. In this report I intend to consider first, continued debates about the framing of qualitative, and especially ethnographic work, after the so-called crisis of representation, second, the spatialities of qualitative work and third, work in a performative vein. In setting out this path I am responding to the critique from Thrift that what is surprising about the reemergence of qualitative methods is what a 'narrow range of skills [there] still is, how wedded [these techniques] still are to notion of bringing back the data and representing nicely packaged up with illustrative quotations' and 'the narrow range of sensate life they register' (2000: 3). My aim here is not to discard all the hard won insights so far but to see whether 'Pushed in the appropriate direction there is no reason why these methods cannot be made to dance a little.' (Latham 2003: 2000). Moreover, I want to stress that I am not making some call or claim for epochal shifts in approach. Cloke, Cook et al (2004) point out that the oft told history of seeming naïve observation, ceding to formal modelling then to theoretically informed qualitative work is worryingly whiggish.

Thinking about this critique is not to deny representation or the symbolic dimensions of societies, nor to celebrate the non-cognitive as somehow more authentic. I am not suggesting that we can simply access the prelinguistic as a way of avoiding the issues around the politics of representation. Indeed qualitative research is often torn between a constructivist approach and a longing to convey a 'real' sense of the field. As Taussig put it

'But just as we might garner courage to reinvent a new world and live new fictions - what a sociology that would be! - so a devouring force comes at us from another direction, seducing us by playing on our yearning for a true real. Would that it would, would that it could, come clean this true real. I so badly want that wink of recognition, that complicity with the nature of nature. But the more I want it the more I realize it's not for me. Not for you either... which leaves us this silly and often desperate place wanting the impossible so badly that while we believe it is our rightful destiny and so act as accomplices of the real, we also know in our heart of hearts that the way we picture the world and talk is bound to a dense set of representational gimmicks which, to coin a phrase, have but an arbitrary relation to a slippery referent easing its way out of graspable sight' (1993, xvii).

I wish to begin with this thorny issue of research in the wake of ‘the crisis of representation’.

Representation, rigour and reflexivity.

Geography has followed anthropology through the debates on ethnography and representation, responding to Clifford’s question ‘how is unruly experience transformed into an authoritative written account?’ (in Besio and Butz 2004: 433; Throop 2003). There has been a backlash against what are decried as ‘excesses’ of reflexivity in some responses to this question. For instance, Bourdieu (2003) called for a renewed ‘objectivity’ via structural reflexivity in a *participant objectivation*. However, with evident distaste, he clarifies lest:

‘One might be misled into believing that I am referring here to the practice, made fashionable over a decade ago by certain anthropologists, especially on the other side of the Atlantic, which consists in observing oneself observing, observing the observer in his work of observing or of transcribing his observations ... and, last but not least, on the narrative of all these experiences which lead, more often than not, to the rather disheartening conclusion that all is in the final analysis nothing but discourse, text, or, worse yet, pretext for text.’ (page 282).

His objection to this is visceral (and vicious) arguing it ‘tends to substitute the facile delights of self-exploration for the methodical confrontation with the gritty realities of the field’ (ibid). He argues for a positional understanding of reflexivity, to address the academic and social structures that drive research agendas or, as McDowell put it, ‘make visible our own critical positioning within the structure of power’ (1992: 413) which for geography in non-western settings would show how ‘academic research practices... have relied extensively on remnant colonial discourses and structures of domination for access to research subjects, efficacy of data collection, and legitimation’ (Butz and Besio 2004: 350). Bourdieu frets that textual reflexivity recreates the myth of the exceptional researcher set apart from their respondents not now by the clarity of their knowledge, but by their level of introspection, doubt and anxiety. Bourdieu suggests that demystifying research practice by subjecting it to the same tools of analysis used on our topics of study. In a move echoing Latourian sociology, he thus suggests reflexivity is not marked out by especially sensitive texts but is endemic and structural.

And yet, trenchant as this may be it does not actually seem to answer the questions that deconstruction poses. There clearly are issues of rhetorical structure if we look at how informant quotes, fieldnotes and the like are presented – for instance the evidential yet context free quote or the apparently transparently described enigma that draws the reader into an explanatory game (Katz

2001: 450). It is also true as Katz points out that 'in the field and in their private readings, ethnographers share a culture of evaluation which is masked by the fractious, even righteously indignant commentary that characterizes rhetoric about ethnographic writing' (2002:64). We should not fall back into a position where 'realism' and transparency are taken as unproblematic, nor should we suggest that all rhetorical work conveying a sense of the real is somehow out to deceive:

'It is tempting to imagine that nothing more than manipulative rhetoric produces descriptions of social life that convey a 'you-are- there' sense of immediacy. But if all that were required was the motivation to manipulate readers, such passages would be more common; it seems they are not that easy to pull off. Moreover, whatever the contribution of writing style, there are, once again, good sociological reasons for the rhetorical effect.' (Katz 2002: 71).

The creation of effects is precisely the business of writing. Local color or vignettes need not be cheap rhetorical tricks but might be vital to show people's crafty, idiosyncratic ways of finessing persistent problems (Katz 2002). Fine (2003: 45) thus argues that a detailed account of the world being observed has to be presented, as opposed to the inclusion of a few instances of data to bolster one's analytical points, to build a case, rather than simply illuminate it. He argues that: 'As ethnographers, we must do more than claim: we need to *show*' (Page 54). In the case of one female informant, Katz argues that is only through realistic description that one can convey how 'The resources the woman finds for resistance come specifically from the very culture that oppresses her (2002:72).

Thus Butz and Besios (2004) offer an alternate reflexivity, taking Marie Louse Pratt's definition of autoethnography, where rather than being about reflecting on one's own practice it refers to subject or dominated people's self representation to colonizers in ways that engage with colonizer's terms while remaining faithful to their own self-understandings. As Pratt put it:

'Autoethnographic texts are not then, what are usually thought of as autochthonous or "authentic" forms of self-representation ... Rather they involve a selective collaboration with and appropriation of idioms of the metropolis or conqueror. These are merged or infiltrated to varying degrees with indigenous idioms to create self-representations intended to *intervene* in metropolitan modes of understanding' (in Butz and Besios 2004: 353).

Butz, building on his earlier work discusses how he as researcher was involved with locals in reappropriating colonial knowledges for strategic ends making representations that will speak to outsiders. This translation is not just reframing local knowledges, Gold (2002) looks to a globalised religious movement that is using its self-representations and indeed academic work in its self

constitution. This makes the important point of not separating ethnography from writing – not privileging oral research over written material but rather seeing productions of various representations as moments for situated reading and interpretation by all actors. And this is a two way process if one looks at taking research and spinning it into local idioms – and all these translations, back and forth raise further practical and important issues of mis-understandings (Watson 2004). If we thus move to models of representation as intervention rather than corresponding to prior reality, we might look for new ways of producing and judging truth. Kamberelis looks to the ‘trickster’ figure as someone who intervenes and acts as an individual but whose performance is communal. Moreover it suggests a research accounts that are poetic, transgressive, unfinalizable and transformable, where methodological syncretism is analogous to shape-shifter characters in non-western ways of knowing – leading to ‘the production of open, nonrepresentational texts’ (2003:676). ‘Trickster and all of his/her texts are far from representational. Instead they are creative, dynamic, and multiple. In fact Trickster may be read as an almost pure embodiment of cultural creativity, dynamism and multiplicity’ (ibid). This also suggests qualifying our understanding of informants’ knowledge. The shared assumption tended to be of local knowledge and researcher ignorance – where the challenge of methods was to allow the researcher to tap into that knowledge. Now although many recent accounts have pointed to interviews as co-constructions of knowledge, there is still often a sense of seeking insider knowledge. Whereas as James Ferguson, working in the urban Zambian copper belt puts it:

‘Here there is much to be understood, but none of the participants in the scene can claim to understand it all or even take it all in. Everyone is a little confused (some more than others, to be sure), and everyone finds some things that seem clear and others that are unintelligible or only partially intelligible... understanding must take on a different character when to understand things like the natives is to miss most of what is going on’ (cited in Hannerz 2003: 210)

Refreshingly Besios and Butz (2004) provide their own critique of transcultural representation. They point out this is not an automatic process but something that has to be worked at and may only be achieved in specific circumstances. Thus Besios reflects on working with locals who do not seek ‘transcultural’ representation but whose struggles are local. The ability of the researcher to help mobilise these autoethnographies they also note is closely tied to issues of positionality in the sense usually subjected to reflexive analysis. This must entail more than intercultural dynamics but also interpersonal ones such as sexualisation. The latter is not just the ‘romance of the field’, but can also be part of the personal circumstances of research. Cupples (2002) both benefited and suffered from male respondents feigning interest in her project for sexual motives she cannot pretend her

work was innocent of sexualisation. Nor is this surprising since ‘Sexuality both produces space and permeates social life, then the fieldwork experience is no different. A more reflexive approach to the fieldwork experience and research process would necessarily include a consideration of the erotic dimension and the impact of the researcher’s sexuality’ (Cupples 2002:382; Hubbard 2002). While we might note how some aspects of identity are less malleable than other, for instance notions of escaping ethnic identity are often a white fantasy (Loftsdóttir 2002), we can also highlight the multiple positionalities of researchers with multiple elements of their identity interacting with locals. Researchers too are seen as embodied ordinary folk – who may be objects of sexual speculation, or spouses with partners present, or they may be seen as parents of children (neither of these latter two necessarily preventing the first) or employers of assistants or childcare (Cupples and Kindon 2003) renters of houses and thus sources of finance and so forth quite outwith the ‘research interaction’ and these identities roll into shaping how the researcher is treated (DeVerteuil 2004; Magolda 2000; van Vleet 2003).

Translocal research

This positioning of the transcultural reflects how much of our work is in places where global, national and local influences mix. We find that ‘reality and its representations become confounded in one another, at once both cause and effect, each inseparably a part of the phenomenology of everyday life in the postcolony. Thus do imported and domestic spirits infuse each other; all being signs of both the local and the translocal, here and elsewhere, now and then, the concrete and the virtual.’ Until sites are ‘simultaneously supralocal, translocal, and local, simultaneously planetary and, refracted through the shards of vernacular cultural practices, profoundly parochial.’ (Comaroff and Comaroff 2003: 149, 151). This ‘awkward scale’ of contemporary societies means that almost everything occurs on a scale that does not yield easily to received methods and our ‘subjects’ no longer inhabit coherent bounded social contexts for which we have a persuasive lexicon (Comaroff and Comaroff 2003: 152). Comaroff and Comaroff are thus led to wonder ‘What, in the upshot, are we left with? A very stark question: Has ethnography become an impossibility? Have we finally reached its end?’ (ibid).

The apocalyptic tones of this debate seems particular to anthropology with its habitual definition of field work as residential participant observation – as oppose to the more plural practices of qualitative methods in geography. Anthropology’s contested answer has been to allow the field to fragment into multi-site ethnographies. Where Hine (2000:60) suggests a new geographical sensitivity is utilised to move from a notion of field as bounded site to field of relations:

‘Ethnographers might still start from a particular place, but would be encouraged to follow connections which were made meaningful from that setting. The ethnographic sensitivity would focus on the ways in which particular places were made meaningful and visible. Ethnography in this strategy becomes as much a process of following connections as it is a period of inhabitation’.

While this is deeply appealing, I have a slight feeling then of the ‘emperor’s new clothes’ here, as when Hannerz (2004) conducts a multisite ethnography it really seems a methodologically standard interview study of a specific type of informant. Perhaps paradoxically qualitative methods in geography have often been locationally pluralistic but methodologically more uniform (for instance a corporate interview based study where the interviews occur in various head offices - the details of which are often not featured in the account). Multisite ethnographies seem to retain more of a pluralism as regards sources to include a range of ‘polymorphous engagements’ involving ‘interacting with informants across a number of dispersed sites, but also doing fieldwork by telephone and email, collecting data eclectically in many different ways from a disparate array of sources’ (Hannerz 2003: 212). This eclecticism has scandalized some quarters that seek to preserve the ‘rigour’ of more traditional field work (Gustavson and Cytrynbaum 2003; Wogan 2004).

The question emerges as to how to reshape our techniques and representations for these multi-scaled, translocal places. One answer might be the literary projects of Perec which Becker suggests form ‘ethnography as generalized fiction’ (2001:6). Perec’s *I Remember* [*Je me souviens*] is not a novel or story at all, but consists simply of 480 very short, numbered paragraphs. His aim is to list ‘what people who participated in the daily, public life of the city would have seen: the buses and the Metro, the places where you bought food, the movie houses and other places of entertainment, the sports figures a young man would have been interested in.’ (Becker 2001:68). In this it echoes the work of Benjamin in compiling material and fragments of modern life. Alternatively to reflect the conflictual history and geography of field sites we might turn to Ghosh who turned his PhD into a novel (1998) - placing his autobiographical persona at the center of the account and thus undercutting the authoritative persona he developed in his thesis by making a braided narrative, alternating the story of fieldwork and mediaeval slave trades, setting the ‘village’ in long standing transnational networks (Srivastava 2001).

Translocal research also extends the field into the home and the site of interpretation. The challenges here remain under discussed where we ‘enthusiastically recount the ups and downs, the embarrassing – although always heroically turned to account – mishaps of research. But the many twists and turns of analysis are another story’ (Salzinger 2004: 6). Meth and Malaza (2003:154)

found that while interviews could be conducted in imagined safe ‘halfway’ locations between South African township, constructed as a place of fear and crime, and researcher’s base, constructed as alien to interviewees, the transcripts of interviews on domestic violence were less easy to contain as they invaded the safe space of the researcher’s home with their shocking contents. Which should prompt us to think about where these materials are located, in the UK recent surveys suggest that 90% of qualitative data is stored in people’s homes and offices (Corti 2003: 418). This survey was part of an initiative to archive qualitative data raising interesting issues about how material can be reused by subsequent researchers without reducing the messy interactivity of field work to ‘data’. The notion of qualitative material as archive should also prompt us to think more carefully about the ‘analysis’ and ‘storage’ of qualitative ‘data’ given all the work on the politics of knowledge in archives (Crang 2003).

Creative interventions

These translocal and reflexive studies raise questions about how the usual methods fit these new scales and topics. At one level we might start simply with different methods. Meth (2003) suggests that reflective, discursive diaries firstly offer a ‘discontinuous writing’, allowing people to change their minds and priorities, meaning they are not dominated by what happened the morning before an interview. Moreover they offer different and possibly easier routes for respondents to express themselves, especially their emotions, and reflect upon their own world views. Alternately, Harper (2002) provides a history of the photo-elicitation interview where pictures push people’s normal frames of reference to form the basis for deep discussions of values. His work combined his own and archival pictures with interviews to provoke multiple meanings for respondents (Harper 2003). In a similar vein, a participatory video project, working with Brazilian children, used oral history interviews to foster a stronger sense of collective identity, and the video became the pretext rather than the main outcome (Gómez 2003: 218). Latham (2003) combined diary-interviews along with photoelicitation interviews. This deep work with a small number of respondents contrasts with Derriu’s (2003) photomontage as a way of grasping touristic ‘souvenir Bangkok’ that seems to echo Perec’s fiction. Latham, echoing Preds’ (1989) experiments, uses pictures, text and time diaries to convey a sense of practising places. His writing strategy thus performs the research tactic Kusenbach (2003) calls the ‘go-along’ – interviewing people as they stroll through their neighbourhoods to capture their biographies, linking places and events, their spatial practices and the social architecture (cf Hyams 2003). These sorts of collages raise the question, ‘are they any good?’, and by what criteria is that going to be measured? Sava and Nuutinen (2003: 522) fret that

in the resulting ‘controllable, mock dialogical state form surpasses content. I am more concerned about how to express things than what I have to say’.

The use of pictures in montage and presenting material raises the issue of how visual and verbal relate to each other, whether they could speak to different ways of knowing rather than just being treated as different kinds of evidence (Rose 2003). Qualitative work, even when speaking to multi-method approaches and triangulation tends to imply that these different approaches can be used in a business as usual fashion. As O’Neill et al (2002:72) note the ‘visual in ethnographic research has generally not been used intrinsically for interpreting and representing ethnographic data and culture’ but either as just more data or subordinated to a textualising metaphor. The importation of post-structuralism has:

‘led to the expansion of the sense of “text.” The text could be construed *as such* through nontextual phenomena. The constraints on interpretation produced in the nomination of nontextual media *as text* focused in the main on representation. ... Performing bodies and images of all kinds were in principle included in literary discussions of representation, but explanatory methodologies for these extratextual forms were deferred. ... Clearly, at least from an interdisciplinary point of view, something is lost when performances and images become texts.’ (Soussloff and Franko 2002:33-4)

Whatmore (2003:89-90) notes ‘the spoken and written word constitute the primary form of ‘data’’, whereas the world speaks in many voices through many different types of things that ‘refuse to be reinvented as univocal witnesses’. Qualitative research, despite talking about the body and emotions, frames its enterprise in a particular way that tends to disallow other forms of knowledge.

Therefore we might question how these different forms of knowledge (visual, verbal and tactile) relate to each other. That there might be a non-dialogue between them is exemplified in the notion of interpretative ‘interspace’ developed by Sava and Nuutinen (2003) where researcher and artist send each other field notes and pictures inspired by the other. Rather than a learning dialogue, they highlight how each can act as echo chamber for the other, where they long to access the other side but cling to the safety of their own predispositions. This comes back to the heart of Thrift’s programmatic writing which is ‘suggestive of nothing less than a drive towards a new methodological avant garde that will radically refigure what it is to *do* research’ (Latham 2004:2000). Thrift himself has pointed to dance, perhaps over emphasising the liberatory and noncognitive. In fact research through, rather than about, dance wraps the representational, haptic, emotional and discursive around each other. Thus as Ylönen (2003) danced the Nicaraguan

Maypole with 'Evelyn', and the latter's frankly provocative moves pushed the researcher to feel 'how thoroughly permeated by Western civilization my submissive body was' (page 559). While this may seem like the common discomfort many researchers would feel in this situation, and maybe just generally on the dance floor, it also suggest how knowledge is articulated with embodied codes and memories that 'emerge as flashes' not following 'logical-rational knowledge' (page 565).

It is normally at this point, as we engage artistic approaches, that policy oriented researchers voice concerns about a turn away from commitments to engaging ordinary people and offering them voice. This seems to me to be a false opposition of committed, 'real world' versus 'inaccessible', theoretical research. Let us take the issues of silences and speech – where so often empowerment is read as giving voice, silences too can point to significant moments of resistance, both in society and to the process of research (Hyams 2004). For instance Mountz, Miyares et al. (2003:39) realized that hostility to interviews expressed fear of immigration services and 'the fear and mistrust that we negotiated with potential project participants was not a barrier to overcome, but rather, an instructive part of the research process'. While conducting participatory action research with sex workers O'Neill, Giddens et al. (2002: 70) took conventional material (life story interviews) and represented it in artistic form in order to 'access a richer understanding of the complexities of lived experience which can throw light on broader social structures and processes'. Their hope was to open spaces to think and feel critically – to work through the unsayable, the outside of language, the sensual, the non-conceptual (page 78), where audience might be left stunned by paradoxical moments through which an ethnomimetic text 'said' the unsayable of a prostitute's experience. In this way art is a way of accessing the 'sedimented stuff' of society that is normally hidden and overlooked (ibid.). Fuentes' ethnographic film – *Bontoc Eulogy* – about a Filipino warrior, his grandfather, brought to the US as ethnographic specimen, challenges qualitative audiences in different ways through in its use of 'found' archival footage. The film echoes surrealist methods of found art, and an aesthetic parallel that becomes more apparent when the credits of the film reveal all characters and events to be fictional (Rony 2003). The aim is to make the viewer 'rethink his or her assumptions about authoritarian narration and his or her belief in the "truth" value of ethnographic and newsreel footage. ... Like the spectators at the world's fair whom Fuentes describes as always wanting to see the natives as untouched, as "authentic displays of barbaric savagery," the viewer also desires to believe in the authenticity of Fuentes's tale' (Rony 2003:139). Our complicity in a desire for the real is thus problematised.

A Modest conclusion:

I want to end this report by returning our attention to the rich yet ambiguous and messy world of doing qualitative research. As Thrift notes: 'Though fieldwork is often portrayed as a classical colonial encounter in which the fieldworker lords it over her/his respondents, the fact of the matter is that it usually does not feel much like that at all. More often it is a curious mixture of humiliations and intimidations mixed with moments of insight and even enjoyment' (Thrift 2003: 106), where knowledge is coproduced 'by building fragile and temporary *commonplaces*' (page 108, see also Tillmann-Healy 2003). This seems to me a good summary of the qualitative work currently being done in geography. It remains inspired by ethical and political concerns, and practitioners are deeply concerned by the moral and political implications of their work. Some of the old taken-for-granted about fieldwork have indeed been replaced, but it is instructive to wonder what questions have not been asked. While we have struggled to populate our work with real subjects rather than research objects, there have been fewer attempts to talk about materialities in practice if not in topic. There have been even fewer animalities. While we have talked around emotion, there has been less work through emotions – at least not that is acknowledged. The body has recently become an important topic of work, but not yet something through which research is often done. I do not think this entails a rejection of work that has been, is being and will be done; nor a turn from engaged and practical work. But I think it does raise issues about the investment in specific notions of what 'research' is, what evidence is and how the two relate to each other.

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